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ABSTRACT

Gifted and talented children have cognitive and affective characteristics that set them apart from their more typical classmates. These characteristics may be particularly problematic in rural areas where stability, traditional values, small schools, and self-sufficiency can be at once a barrier and a support. This paper discusses the characteristics, needs, and identification of gifted learners, as well as the barriers and benefits offered to them by rural communities. Rural students as a group have different educational and life experiences than their urban and suburban peers. As a result, gifted rural students may be underidentified by standardized tests with an urban bias. Identification and appropriate instruction of gifted rural females are also influenced by social bias and stereotypical expectations. Barriers to gifted education in rural areas may include limited school finances, lack of qualified educators, problematic grouping arrangements due to the small number of gifted students, and problems arranging time and place of instruction. Strengths of rural communities may include small class size, which can make individualized instruction easier. Programming strategies for rural schools must include differentiation of the regular curriculum for all gifted learners. Rural schools are challenged to keep in mind the unique characteristics of their communities. Sharing resources and making use of technology can help schools provide the variety of instructional options needed by gifted learners. Strategies such as curriculum compacting and tiered assignments are two ways to differentiate that are easy to manage with small numbers of students. Use of the Internet and a variety of on-line activities can broaden experience that may otherwise be limited in rural areas. Contains 18 references. (CDS)

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COUNTRY LIVING: BENEFITS AND BARRIERS FOR GIFTED LEARNERS

Gifted and talented children have cognitive and affective characteristics that set them apart from their more typical classmates (Clark, 1997). These characteristics can be particularly problematic when children live in rural areas where stability, traditional values, small schools, and self-sufficiency can be at once a barrier and a support. Limited resources and opportunities for education and career can hinder the full development of potential for many students (Spicker, Southern, & Davis, 1991). The cost of financial and resource limitations for those with gifted abilities is substantial both in life satisfaction and contributions to society.

Characteristics of Gifted Learners

Giftedness is not well understood (Silverman, 1993). Learners who are gifted have unique characteristics that set them apart from others. They learn quickly, have good memories, can use stored information to solve problems, can think in abstract terms at an early age, and are frequently highly verbal. They tend to be supersensitive to actual and implied inequities in treatment of themselves and others, are often unusually idealistic, and may be especially critical of themselves and others (Clark, 1997). Silverman (1993) points out that they demonstrate an "asynchrony" in development between their cognitive, social, emotional, and physical abilities that is not typical. While all children have different levels of skill in these four major domains, the more gifted the child the greater the asynchrony among these skills and the more pronounced the discrepancy with the child's chronological age. It is these unique characteristics that set gifted learners apart from their more typical peers. They are not better or more valuable human beings, they simply have different learning needs, and as such require a differentiated education (Clark, 1997).

Needs of Gifted Learners

Gifted learners need to experience intellectual challenge like other students. They are capable of understanding more advanced, abstract, and complex ideas than their more typical peers, and can accomplish this in a shorter amount of time. They need to work at the appropriate difficulty level for them so they develop appropriate study habits, otherwise life-long underachievement might ensue. The lack of challenge gifted learners frequently experience in school may inadvertently teach them that learning does not require work when you are bright. It is not unusual for gifted learners to waste large portions of time waiting for their classmates to learn what they already know, or what they learned with minimal practice. They do not develop a realistic understanding of their talents without some comparison with other high ability learners. Therefore, they need to spend time with intellectual peers for at least part of the day (Clark, 1997). Gifted learners need less structure in their learning environment; indeed, they prefer it. Thus, while they should not be left to teach themselves, they need less direct instruction and frequently benefit from independent learning opportunities (Gallagher & Gallagher, 1994). They also need to learn about themselves, including the characteristics of giftedness that set them apart from other children, so they can learn to accept themselves and channel their strengths appropriately. Finally, they need caring adults who will facilitate their learning, provide guidance when needed, and create a safe environment in which gifted learners can grow and develop their talents without fear of ridicule (Silverman, 1993).

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Identification

Rural students as a group have different educational and life experiences when compared with their peers in the suburbs or city. Whether they are identified by the usual checklists and standardized tests may be a function of how well they are acculturated to the urban/suburban values and experiences. Children who have only occasionally been to a town with a population of perhaps a thousand have no idea what a city is like. Yet standardized tests are based on familiarity with everyday life in urban areas. This bias can lower test scores and limit opportunities for rural children regardless of culture (Spicker et al., 1991).

Students who differ from the more typical population in culture, language, life experiences, or physical or emotional health are not as readily identified as gifted. Because the characteristics that are typically used to identify students as gifted learners are not manifested in the same ways in diverse populations as in the "mainstream" culture, these children frequently remain unchallenged and may continue underachieving through school (Seeley, 1993). Socioeconomic status and gender can cut across all other characteristics and strongly influence whether a child's gifted abilities are recognized. Expectations play an important role. Few gifted children are located when neither they nor their elders think there can be high ability learners in certain schools, communities, or cultures. As Spicker et al. (1991) point out, poverty is an on-going problem for many families living in rural areas, and it is poverty rather than ethnic diversity that limits opportunities for children. Who would expect to identify potentially gifted learners in populations of children with the following characteristics?

- a deficiency in language skills,
- lack of perceptual skill development in language differentiation,
- lack of stimulation for asking or answering questions,
- lack of enrichment activities,
- lack of concern over school attendance,
- lack of curiosity due to paucity of objects in the home,
- lack of support by parents of the school establishment,
- lack of parental understanding of the educative process,
- lack of quiet time for fostering discriminatory listening skills,
- lack of self-confidence,
- lack of time consciousness, and
- lack of vocabulary related to the school establishment.

(Michael & Dodson, 1978, as cited in Spicker et al., 1991, p. 93)

Identification and appropriate instruction for females of all ages are also influenced by stereotypical expectations. As girls grow and mature, they tend to be socialized into hiding their abilities. They may be assertive as young children, but they learn to please others. Being assertive in demonstrating and acquiring learning is not socially acceptable for many girls (Silverman, 1993). The unfortunate result is that they may not appear gifted to parents or teachers. Girls tend to score lower than boys on standardized tests of achievement throughout school. The difference between the performances of boys and girls is even more pronounced at the very highest levels of the tests; very few girls achieve top scores even when they receive A+'s in school. The result is they are less likely than boys to be identified for gifted programs, scholarships, or special programs (Sadker & Sadker, 1994). As a result, their self-esteem and achievement suffer. Fewer women than men are seen as gifted based on adult production (Silverman, 1993). Girls who live in rural environments are even more likely to experience social pressure to behave in traditional ways because that is the cultural norm for everyone. Kleinsasser (1988) points out that the act of labeling girls puts them in a stressful position for which they will need adult support. On the one hand they are expected to excel and pursue higher education and professional careers; on the other, they are reminded daily that the traditional role of women is to maintain a home

and raise a family. While reform movements in more populous areas of the country are addressing the needs of girls, no such plans are being developed in rural areas (American Association of University Women & Cohen, 1996).

Effective identification occurs when teachers are well informed about the characteristics of gifted learners and the assessment procedures are selected to show students at their best. Providing frequent, quality staff development for teachers, counselors, administrators, and staff is a must. Not only is it important these individuals understand the characteristics and needs of gifted learners, they must understand biases and prejudices that are inherent in the assessment process and how to avoid them. Students who do not "fit" the typical picture of a gifted child will not even make the first screening. Identification procedures must be selected that are not biased against children with rural experiences. That suggests nontraditional approaches for screening and selection, such as employing untimed and nonverbal intelligence tests, examining anecdotal evidence from teachers and parents, looking for evidence of problem solving outside tests (Spicker et al., 1991), evaluating student interests and products from inside and outside the school (Seeley, 1993), and possibly including curriculum-based assessments (Joyce & Wolking, 1988).

Pitts (1986) cautions to "be aware that the identification procedure is particularly delicate and critical in a small town" (p. 24). Criteria for selection should be described in writing in the school policies and made available to the public. A blind review of the data on each child should be conducted by a multidisciplinary committee (Pitts, 1986). These procedures along with a set policy for handling grievances can go a long way towards avoiding accusations of favoritism that could quickly kill a gifted program.

Barriers and Benefits of Rural Communities

Identifying gifted students and providing them with an appropriately differentiated curriculum is a challenge in any community; it is even more difficult in rural areas. Even the term "rural" adds to the dilemma, for its definition can mask critical issues. "The key to definition is not in numbers but in relationships between people and between people and the land" (Mathews, 1982, as cited in Spicker et al., 1991, p. 93). The people hold traditional values and belief in small schools offering free public education under local control (Spicker et al., 1991). Local control may mean one small school with only two or three students. Sometimes these small schools may affiliate with a larger school to share resources. Spicker et al. point out that financial and other resources are limited because small, rural communities typically have a limited tax base, schools offer fewer courses, counselors and educational specialists may not be available on a regular basis, and program options for special populations may be limited. Local educators may be in serious need of training to work knowledgeably and effectively with gifted learners (Ert & Wolf, 1996).

Not only are resources thinly stretched, there are few gifted children per grade. In a K- 12 school of 200, not many gifted learners will be found at any grade level making grouping arrangements more problematic. Yet grouping high ability peers for instruction is strongly recommended by authorities in gifted (e.g., Clark, 1997). Who will provide the instruction when teachers and administrators may already have multiple assignments, not all in areas of expertise? When and where will instruction be carried out when additional time and space may be at a premium? How will coherent and defensible services be developed for K-12 gifted children when there may be only 10-15 gifted learners among all the grades (Spicker et al., 1991)? Even if teachers and administrators believe these children need more challenge and rigor, how they will make this happen is exacerbated by limited resources. This is where creativity and resourcefulness can turn many of the behaviors that build barriers into assets to counteract the unavoidable challenges of rural life styles.

One of the strengths of rural communities comes from its traditional shared values and stability, and sense of community (Ert & Wolf, 1996). These characteristics, however, can discourage offering services for gifted learners that might be perceived as special privileges (Jones & Southern, 1992). Teachers or parents may be viewed with suspicion when they begin advocating for special instruction for gifted learners. What makes them an "expert?" When only a few students would benefit from advanced learning experiences in any community, the need seems less important; the small numbers in rural schools may appear even less significant. The habit of self-sufficiency in many aspects of daily life can discourage local school officials from asking for advise from outside experts (Spicker et al., 199 1) or teachers from asking for help individualizing instruction for one or two students.

Pitts (1986) recommends starting small with gifted programming and letting success build community pride. Advance planning (Pitts, 1986) and "continuous and assertive leadership" are necessary to overcome barriers to the creation of quality programs (Clark, 1997, p. 223). Rural schools should not try to duplicate service options developed for more populous areas (Pitts, 1986; Ert & Wolf, 1996). Innovative use of local resources can help compensate for limited choices and capitalize on native self-sufficiency. Basic traditions and community stability can be maintained not only by staying the same, but also by educating the next generation well so they can develop the skills necessary to solve difficult problems that may threaten their way of life in the future. Changing the status quo is not easy, and the impetus needs to come from within. If school and town leaders unite, they can help the community recognize the advantages that can accrue from providing sufficiently challenging learning opportunities for every student. Emphasis on collaboration is critical to success (Ert & Wolf, 1996).

Delivery of the advanced instruction needed by gifted learners may even require cooperative agreements with neighboring communities, such as pooling material and human resources. With strong leadership, town members might be encouraged to focus their sense of pride on their contributions to a consortium of schools that can enhance learning through shared resources. For example, mobile enrichment vans (Clark, 1997) can transport science equipment, libraries, and other resources across district lines to out-lying schools. Some communities even combine the public and school libraries and computers on school property, providing an outside access for town members.

Rural schools have some distinct advantages. Their small class size can make it easier to individualize despite limited resources since more teacher contact time is available for all students. Cross-age grouping may be necessary so gifted learners can have instructional time with ability peers. This could be accomplished with less concern for potential detrimental effects of wide age spans because fewer students allow for more effective monitoring and small community size increases the likelihood that faculty know the students and their families. Working together for the good of the group, community members can provide the next generation of potential local experts with a nurturing environment and challenging studies.

Programming strategies

Differentiation of the regular curriculum is a necessity for all gifted learners (VanTasselBaska, 1994). The challenge in rural areas is to also keep in mind the unique characteristics of the communities. Maker (1982) recommends that teachers turn learners' strengths into needs and then strive to meet their needs. For gifted learners, a strength should be viewed as a need for differentiated instruction to enhance individual skills. Strategies for providing this instruction may have to be modified because 1) few children may need enhanced learning opportunities, 2) fewer financial resources are available, 3) teachers and administrators may already be teaching in several areas, and 4) fewer curricular and support materials may be available (Spicker et a]., 1991).

Despite limited resources, individualization is easier in small rural schools because they have a family atmosphere and class size is small. Sharing resources and making use of technology can help schools provide the variety of instructional options needed by gifted learners (Spicker et al., 199 1). Methods for grouping and delivering instruction need to be tailored to take full advantage of community strengths, interests, and resources, and not try to follow models that were developed for large urban or suburban schools (Bull, 1987). Strategies such as curriculum compacting (see Reis & Renzulli, 1992) and tiered assignments (see Coleman, 1996) are but two ways to differentiate that are easy to manage with small numbers of students. With the Internet, world resources such as art galleries, museums, zoos, concerts, libraries, scientific research, and exploration of Earth and space are as close as the user's fingertips. While on-line adventures are not equivalent to real experiences, it does help compensate for some of the limitations found in rural areas. In addition, email and listserves can provide networking, interaction, and support for students, parents, and teachers who would otherwise be isolated (Lewis, 1998). Class discussions can be conducted via email, or closed chat rooms linking students from distant communities in meaningful collaboration in areas of interest. Videotapes of class projects and discussions can be mailed to cooperating classes from schools beyond the boundaries of the immediate town (Bull, 1987). Interactive distant learning technology is becoming increasingly available in schools and community colleges. It can be employed to develop and connect learning groups between schools dispersed over a wide area or across district or even state and national lines. (See Bull, 1987 for additional examples of program and instruction options viewed from a rural perspective).

Students need challenging and meaningful ways to use the time they "buy" when already - mastered material is compacted. Gifted students need someone to structure, monitor, and teach independent study skills so they can learn to apply them. Teachers should make sure gifted learners are working at a sufficiently rigorous level, while at the same time providing the environmental support necessary for them to risk tackling highly challenging materials and tasks. Enrichment clusters, whether single-age or cross-age grouped offer an attractive option for independent study of meaningful problems (see Renzulli, 1999). Mentorships are a particularly useful method of providing individualized experiences and training for secondary level students. While the diversity of experts found in urban areas is not usually available in rural communities, experts can be found that apply content area skills in ways that are relevant for their community. In addition, mentors in distant locations can be accessed using the phone (Bull, 1987), email, or the net meeting component of Web browser software. Gifted high school students can mentor their younger gifted peers, strengthening the family environment often found in small schools and sharing knowledge and skills that could be mutually beneficial.

Each community and each school is unique. It is important to look at the positives and strive to enhance them, rather than focusing on barriers. Jones and Southern (1992) found that teacher and coordinator training increased the positive attitudes towards various programming options for gifted learners. Individuals from inside or outside the community who are providing staff development and support need to be sensitive to the cares and concerns of not only parents and educators, but also the various institutions within the community. Services for gifted learners need to be tailored to suit the unique environments in which they live while at the same time offering sufficiently challenging opportunities to develop student strengths (Ert & Wolf, 1996). A coherent program of services will take time to develop and will require continual monitoring and adjustment to ensure that it continues to meet student and community needs.

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